Learning to improvise, improvising to learn

Learning to improvise, improvising to learn: a qualitative study of learning processes in improvising musicians.

Abstract

The continual growth of free improvisation as a discrete field of study within academic institutions creates a research priority to investigate the fundamental musical and psychological processes of this uniquely creative and universal form of social activity. This chapter presents interviews with eight expert free improvising musicians. The interviews focused on how the participants developed their creative skills and offers insight into their learning processes. Thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews highlights three main learning modes: autodidactism, mentoring and learning in a social context. The category of autodidactism focuses on how the interviewees constructed pedagogical narratives and engaged in informal modes of learning from a diverse range of musical and social contexts. These areas of learning influenced conceptual and practical approaches to performance. All participants reported obtaining guidance from more experienced musicians who acted as mentors. Importantly many of the participants subsequently became mentors to younger musicians. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of learning in various group contexts. These learning contexts also overlapped, with the participants' mentors encouraging them to be autodidactic as well as playing in groups with them. This flexibility is important to consider when bringing the modes of learning from an informal to formal context. The experiences of the interviewees highlight the socially constructed nature of musical development and how learning to improvise can take place in informal social environments. The chapter also emphasises creativity as a social construction, distributed between individuals in

collaborative contexts – which aligns with social constructivist views on learning as an essentially social process.

Keywords: free improvisation; creativity; autodidactism, mentoring; group learning.

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<1>Introduction

One implication of Charlie Parker's often quoted observation that 'Music is your own experience...They teach you there's a boundary line to music. But, man there's no boundary line to art' (quoted in Levin & Wilson 1949) is that music educators face significant challenges when considering how to teach and develop creative thinking and innovation. These issues have particular relevance when considering appropriate methods and approaches for teaching free improvisation. In comparison to other forms of music (classical, folk, pop), free improvising remains a relatively new approach and there is still much to learn about the processes and principles underpinning this type of creative activity. As interest grows in teaching improvisation and enabling related features of creativity, many free improvisers continue to seek appropriate methods of education and musical development, often within an aesthetic of enculturation, rather than using a more didactic approach.

Importantly, these practices are informed by philosophies and modes of performance that rely upon the social and cultural context of the individual musicians. This chapter reviews the literature on the development and study of free improvisation and presents an analysis of interviews with eight world-leading free improvising musicians. The learning modes and community practices through which their improvising and musical skills were developed contribute key pedagogic principles to the ongoing debate around how improvisation can be taught.

<1>Improvising perspectives

Writing about musical improvisation often takes the starting point of Braxton (1985) and Bailey's (1992) work, highlighting the scarcity of literature about, or recognition for improvised music. However, there has been an exponential growth in the practice of free improvisation and the contexts in which it is utilized (MacDonald and Wilson, 2014; Hickey, 1997). Free improvisation occupies a discrete position in the contemporary musical landscape but also intersects with many other forms, including contemporary classical music, free jazz, experimental music, and experimental art (Rose and MacDonald, 2014). As a unique form of socially situated collaborative creativity, it has much to offer practitioners interested in developing new approaches to working musically in contemporary contexts (Wilson and MacDonald, 2014). Bailey (1992) and Braxton (1985), both improvising musicians who have written about their practice, engaged in critical appraisals of their own professional practice, and more recently academics who are also working musicians such as Lewis (1995) and Borgo (2005) have contributed to research spanning musical, philosophical and pedagogical concerns around improvised music. Bailey (1992) writes from a personal

practitioner's view and, in defining the term non-idiomatic improvisation, differentiates genre-based improvising from free improvising:

> Diversity is its most consistent characteristic. It has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it.

In Bailey's view, free improvised music is defined as being without genre associations that could potentially limit collaborative creative processes between participants with different musical backgrounds. Lewis's (2004) analysis of improvisers practising "methodological hybridity" in seeking to find flexible and open creative situations, acknowledges the need to negotiate the different musical backgrounds and philosophies of those involved in improvised music. It is important to note that the non-idiomatic nature of free improvisation remains a contentious issue more than two decades after Baily's seminal text was published. For example, a contrasting view is that all improvised music is to some extent influenced by performers' backgrounds, which, in most cases, will contain socio-musical features that pertain to genre associations. For example, a classically trained orchestral musician who subsequently plays freely improvised music will in all likelihood display elements of their background in their performing, as will musicians with backgrounds in jazz, pop, and folk music who play freely improvised music. However, as free improvisation has developed, a new generation of musicians who have played only free improvisation has emerged. These musicians could be said to be playing non-idiomatically if improvisation is viewed as unique form of socially situated collaborative creativity rather than as a genre of music. Additionally, experienced improvising musicians can develop a practice free from the genre-

defining elements that may be evident in other aspects of their playing. For example, Eddie Prevost's work in AMM can be argued as being non-idiomatic while in other musical contexts, for example, in a trio with Marilyn Crispell and Harrison Smith, he performs as a free jazz drummer.

Lewis (1996) discusses improvised music as being the 'socio-musical location' of its particular practitioners, recognizing importantly that individual musical identities are negotiated in a larger socially constructed musical framework (MacDonald et al 2002). In this respect, any meaningful field of musical practice represents a community in which there is a reciprocal relationship between the way that the adherents shape how the music is to be defined, and the way that the community is shaped by the music. Communities and musicians practising non-idiomatic free improvisation can be difficult to delimit as there are separate strands of activity in countries all over the world with radically different, and even diametrically opposing opinions about the execution and negotiation of musical ideas.

Sociological and psychological studies of group improvisation in jazz have underlined ways in which musical practices are inescapably intertwined with social practices and contexts: playing jazz involves embracing the 'jazz life' to some extent (Faulkner and Becker, 2009; Wilson & MacDonald 2005; Berliner, 1994). Improvised music has provided a means of expression for marginalized groups through initiatives such as the Feminist Improvising Group (FIG) and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), and these groups have even more explicitly organized both their music and communities around idiosyncratic musical, social and ethical principles. FIG emerged in the late seventies and early eighties from its members' wish to create music together in a women-only space (Smith 2004). It provided an environment where politics, gender issues and different

approaches to improvising could all be explored. Part of the group's philosophy was to work together in an atmosphere and aesthetic that was supportive of, and encouraging to women, which the founders had felt was all but absent on the larger scene. Lewis (2008a) likewise presents the formation of the Chicago-based AACM as arising from the desire for a space for expression that its members could not find elsewhere in their musical world, as well as providing alternative social and pedagogical structures that better served their philosophies and aesthetic. Their constitution specifies that members must be ethical in their musical and business dealings to provide role models for future black musicians, and the Association operated a free music school, the aims being described by member John Shenoy Jackson as '50% music and 50% social uplift' (Lewis 2008a). As well as developing creativity and musicianship, the organization aimed to realize music's potential as a vehicle for enhancing health and wellbeing (MacDonald, Kreutz and Mitchell, 2012).

While free improvisers' creative practice has been theorized (Lewis 1995; 2004) and musical identities within a non-idiomatic improvising group have been explored (Wilson & MacDonald 2012), the centrality of community practices identified by Smith (2004) and Lewis (2008a) highlights a need to understand the distinct ways in which musicians working in this area develop improvising skills and conceptual approaches. Methods of informal learning have been explored in other genres by, for example, Green (2002), who compares informal methods of learning utilized by pop musicians with more formal teaching (in this case instrumental lessons from the Western classical tradition) to show how these two systems can operate as parallel paths of learning. She categorizes these informal learning practices into *enculturation*, *listening*, *copying* and *working with peers* – yet these strategies are perhaps not readily translated into formal music education environments. Green

observes, for example, that when pop musicians went on to teach, they used formal methods of transmitting knowledge rather than drawing on the processes by which they themselves had learned. Some improvising musicians expressed the fear that 'academicization' of improvising might have a negative impact on creativity (Lewis 2000), perhaps indicating a reluctance to introduce informal strategies alongside formal teaching among those with experience of both. This trope also appears in writing on teaching jazz, with concerns expressed by practitioners that teaching can 'fossilize' creativity (Monson, 1996).

Nevertheless, if radical and distinct means of learning have arisen through the particular social milieux of free improvisation, then there is significant potential to enhance musical pedagogy. Indeed, some more informal models of learning seem characteristic of the interactive strategies of this music. Reid (1997), for example, defined aspects of mentoring relationships in teaching as a flow of ideas between teacher and student; encouragement to experiment; and support of musical ideas. The work of Smith (2004) and Lewis (2008b) suggests that informal learning in improvised music is social in nature, consistent with Rogers's (1983) model of self-directed learning in a group with a designated facilitator, and Vygotsky's (1987) work on the significant nature of the group in learning development. Music that is learned outwith the mainstream is also likely to require autodidactic strategies to a greater extent than music catered for by the educational establishment.

The central part of this chapter describes the outcomes of a qualitative study that was undertaken to explore the processes and strategies by which a group of leading free-improvising musicians acquired and developed their musical skills and approaches. The study aimed to identify key practices that might inform broader

music pedagogy, and to indicate how free improvisation might best be taught within existing educational systems – or supported outwith them.

<1> Learning to improvise

As identified previously, free improvisation exists in many different social and cultural contexts, with improvisers and improvising groups employing numerous approaches. It is therefore important that any investigation into how improvisers developed creatively recognizes the diversity of the field. Additionally, since there are relativity few studies that explore how improvising musicians develop their approach, a methodology that facilitates the gathering of subjective information has considerable utility. Considering these factors, the qualitative method of semi-structured interview was chosen as the most effective way to capture nuance and diversity in the data. The researcher (first author), an experienced member of the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra and part of the wider international community of improvising musicians, interviewed eight leading musicians with well-established careers in free improvisation. The rationale for participant selection was to gain insights into how this specialist group became improvisers, and the relatively small sample was chosen to facilitate an in-depth exploration of their subjective experiences.

[Table 1 about here]

The musicians, listed in Table 1 and hereafter referred to by their initials, were interviewed over a period of four months, addressing the following questions:[1]

1. How did the participants come to identify themselves as improvisers?

2. Do they share any common attitudes or experiences in their paths to being improvisers?

3. What role did their communities have in their musical development?

These broad themes informed the interview questions, at times forming part of general discourse as well as acting as a springboard to open up topics in which the musicians had a particular interest. Thematic analysis, a qualitative method, was regarded as the most suitable means of analysis given the participatory character of this research (Braun & Clarke 2008), and through the analysis we aimed to identify key features of interviewee's experience that might be used to conceptualize their educational paths.

The interviews revealed many common experiences, despite the varied nationalities and ages of the participants. All of the participants described a musical upbringing that featured an encouragement to experiment with sound from infancy, instrumental lessons, and being taken to musical theatre. Most of the participants recalled an epiphanic experience when exposed to improvised music that motivated them to find out more about improvised music, to seek out mentors, and to find communities of like-minded musicians. In some cases, this was in parallel to formal lessons with instrumental teachers, these musicians regarding their formal musical education as distinct and separate from improvising – although FL-H, who studied composition, considered improvising as composition in real time (a common discussion within the wider community of improvising musicians). In the course of the thematic analysis, three modes of learning were identified as being particularly significant for these musicians: autodidactism, mentoring, and learning in social contexts; and it is to these three facets of learning that we now turn.

<2>Autodidactism

Autodidactism, or teaching oneself, gives its practitioners agency in choosing settings, philosophies and methods of learning which are appealing to them, or which they judge to be important (Solomon, 2009). Autodidactic practice took place at different points in the lives of the musicians involved in this study, as they created their own educational pathways. The musicians described developing their practice as improvisers through, for example, listening to records – not in an attempt to replicate a song, but as a way of positioning their own musical creativity in a wider context. They also highlighted their own exploration of other cultures and art forms, which then became absorbed into their own improvisational practice. KH, for example, described the particular demands of playing improvised music as analogous to the processes involved in being a Samurai: through his own self-directed path of musical identity development, he absorbed philosophies from different cultures that he encountered. He compared being an improviser to being a warrior, and chose to practice features such as strict mental control over the body and heightened awareness in a musical framework. In creating an educational path though his own particular learning choices, KH sought to demonstrate his artistic and personal values musically, exploring and expressing his cultural preferences within the context of an improvising identity.

In describing their work educating others, the musicians often expressed a desire to engender a sense of agency in their students, as described here first by CT and second by FL-H:

> When a student comes to me looking for lessons I always say before we even get started: 'Why do you play this, why do you do what you do?' and it's like that's the big question, that for me is the fundamental question... if you don't

> know why you do something and seriously pursue the truth in that, well what's coming out? You know, other than a whole load of rote learning.
>
> Get a job and improvise at night and hang out at the library and listen to as many records as you can in your free time and you know... ... read some books... think about it. Be an art student, not necessarily a musician. You bring your clarinet or something and for a couple of hours, you think that someone is gonna tell you, 'this is what you do to be an improviser' and then voilà, you're an improviser.

Both interviewees advocate a vocational approach to becoming an improvising musician and mention some of the practicalities in taking responsibility for self-directed learning. This encouragement that students should themselves be autodidactic represents a significant difference from teaching in other traditions. In classical music, for example, students are often encouraged to follow and internalize the teacher, creating instrumental lineages: in violin playing, for example, Russian, Hungarian, American and Japanese schools of pedagogy have distinct methodologies. While neither of the two improvisers quoted above sought to pass on a specific method, they nevertheless pinpointed specific characteristics that they believed were crucial: independent thinking and critical appraisal of one's own practice. A key point is FL-H's exhortation to be an art student rather than a musician, since in art schools, learning and support are provided through one-to-one tutorials and group criticism. By invoking this system, FL-H encourages students to investigate independently those subjects that are of interest and relevance to their personal practice. This 'art school approach' can also facilitate an engagement with wider conceptual issues related to contemporary music that can often be missing from in more conventional music

performance education.

<2> Mentoring relationships

A mentor can be defined in various ways: as a counselor, guide, teacher, advisor or guru depending on cultural circumstances. A mentor can, for instance, represent an informal guide to less experienced musicians within Scottish folk music; or may be placed in a more hierarchical relationship based on reverence, for example, in Japanese court music. The role of a mentor differs from that of a teacher in that it is flexible in both the learning path and structure, and may offer no formal financial reward to the mentor MacGlone (2013).

Certain improvising musicians, such as Fred Anderson in Chicago and John Stevens in London, were singled out by interviewees as influential and inspirational figures, both in facilitating workshops and in mentoring other musicians. John Stevens was acknowledged as a personal influence through his group the Spontaneous Music Ensemble (SME), and his book *Search and Reflect* (1985), which contained a collection of exercises and pieces exploring improvisation in practice. By hosting regular sessions at The Little Theatre Club, he was seen as giving aspiring improvisers a forum to work through musical philosophies and techniques which facilitated the individual's artistic development through exploring free improvisation as part of a group. MN described her relationship with John Stevens:

> He would play as well, which of course I'd not experienced in teaching—[usually] the teacher's outside the process and they observe, whereas John led by embodying and sharing his musicality with you by playing, so of course, that was my role model.

In a more traditional master-apprentice learning model, teachers usually demonstrate,

and then encourage imitation, a process which MN had experienced previously. In contrast to this, by 'embodying' his musicality to her, Stevens mentored her through playing and creating new music *with* her. Mentoring through improvising in this way represents a dynamic collaborative process in which the less experienced musician is recognized as contributing creatively, empowering the learner by being inclusive and generous. Stevens introduced creative strategies to shape group improvisations at the Little Theatre sessions through a series of pieces that then contributed to *Search and Reflect* (Stevens 1985). Stevens guided MN through these pieces but left specific musical negotiations and navigations to her, in this way taking an important role not only as a mentor, but also as a creator of pieces that could be used by other musicians for performance, or to use in enabling improvisation.

In reflecting on his motivation for seeking mentors, CT points to the importance of 'personal chemistry' in the ways in which people gravitate towards one another:

> It's like mentors or mature musicians gravitate towards serious students, and I was always a serious student, you know, so it's always been about the music, or it's always been about like, I'm serious about what I do, whatever that has been, so I've always found it very easy to find mentors and mentors have always taken me on. That's always a reciprocal relationship because, you know, you can't force your way into a relationship, unless you're buying it and that's not how it's been...people who like to have students as well and like to feel that their traditions aren't dying.

As CT points out, there has to be interest from each side in the music or musical potential of the other, and the student has to appear 'serious' and 'serious about what I do', showing commitment and demonstrating that it will be worth investing time and

energy in the relationship. The importance of exchange is highlighted here – exchanges of ideas, music, inspiration and energy between the two parties.

CT also touches on the idea of passing down a musical legacy, of carrying musical traditions to the next generation, so that an improviser's name, music and aesthetic continue to be heard after they die. The desire to connect to luminaries in the same field or to leave a personal musical stamp for future generations is of course a motivation for teachers in other genres as well, and it is common for classical musicians to refer to their 'pedigree' through teaching lines that can stretch back to Liszt and Beethoven. However, while the exchange recognized by CT has features in common with these learning relationships from other traditions, in the mentor-friend relationships recounted by the interviewees here, mentees were viewed by mentors as fellow musicians – less experienced, but still colleagues. The interviewees conveyed more nuanced relationships than the master-apprentice model, as seen in their social aspect. Mentors and mentees defined the parameters of their own relationships, and learning could be by analogy and unrelated to an instrument. For example, SB described listening to and critiquing records with more experienced layers:

> Evan (Parker) and Derek (Bailey) were the reason I moved to London, they were definitely my mentors...I used to spend a lot of time going to their houses and talking and drinking tea and listening to records... Evan, he is a demon record collector, he's got a huge collection, particularly Coltrane, you know, everything by Coltrane, he's completely obsessive and very articulate and knowledgeable about it, so that was definitely part of my education.

By spending a lot of time in mentors' houses, both the personal and professional areas of mentors' lives opened up to SB, offering a friendly, reciprocal environment in which to learn. Interestingly, SB's main instrument is the piano, which neither mentor

played professionally, emphasizing that it is the wider or more general aspects of improvised music that he learned about from these mentors, rather than features that were instrumentally specific. SB described his mentors at this stage in his musical development as guiding him through a philosophical and critical journey by sharing recordings and using them as a springboard for critical analysis. The guidance provided him with a range of musical and critical tools that enhanced his musical and non-musical development, providing a rich learning experience and the confidence that would prepare him for his future as an improviser. Mentoring thus constitutes a significant process through which free improvisation can be taught and learned, and is characterized by the experience of shared practice, non-hierarchical relationships, and a basis in musical, critical and philosophical perspectives.

<2>Learning in a social context

The final theme in this chapter considers the vital functions of communities of practice (Barrett 2005; Cox 2005; Barrett, Ballantyne, Harrison, and Temmerman 2009) in facilitating personal and creative growth. All of the interviewed musicians situated themselves as part of a community of improvisers, many belonging to several ensembles with overlapping personnel. These networks provide support mechanisms for their members, and their importance is underlined by the frequency with which musicians spoke of these communities and their key practices.

In the following extract, EP described mentoring as a responsibility of community members:

> When you get to my stage, there's some obligation to use your situation to advance the positions of other players that you feel are especially worthy of it...its just a necessary part of being in a community, a community of players.

> Mentoring it may be, but I certainly get people coming to see me to talk about this and that...If they're prepared to come all the way to Faversham, then … I try to make it: well you've done all of this, that's interesting; talk about yourself. And then we can talk about mouthpieces and reeds and all the rest of it or gigs, or whatever they want to talk about...Say if somebody comes from America you know, makes their way on the train down to here, I think their motivation is clear, and then I try and make it an interesting experience for them. Some of that might be walking round the town or showing them a building from 1457; or talk about the structure of medieval market towns. You know it's by analogy some of it.

EP refers to his perceived obligation to mentor younger players as a necessary duty of community members, and this strong sense of a personal expectation (both intrinsic and extrinsic) to give back to the community he benefitted from echoes the dual aim of AACM and FIG to create alternatives to existing power structures in music, as well as spaces for creativity. EP expressed a deeply-felt sense of social consciousness in his interview, stating 'I always leaned to the left', as well as antagonism towards 'structures that have injustice build into them'. For EP, this desire to create alternative structures embodying equality and fairness as central tenets brings him to the task of maintaining and propagating his community through mentoring others. As well as finding a practical application of his own political beliefs through this community orientation, EP presents the personal interactions that form improvised music communities as being based on the desire to create fairer organisations.

Similarly, FL-H describes an improvising community in New York of which he was a part in the 1980s.

> I was really lucky: I found a free improvised community. A community of

> improvisers on the Lower East Side, and every Sunday they had a concert and it wasn't hard to book something and play every few weeks...And then you could go and hear two different groups every Sunday and talk about it with other people and get more of a sense of a continuity of a community.

Through this group, FL-H enjoyed many benefits associated with being part of a community, such as the secure basis for innovation that comes from stability of personnel. FL-H's group functioned through a number of different modes of discourse and interaction, the whole group engaging in discussions and debates about rehearsals and performances, and critical appraisal of each other's work – as well as playing. The practices of this community of New York improvisers highlight a number of key features, which include: stable and committed personnel; social cohesion leading to the type of trust that facilitates creative freedom; and an environment conducive to exploring experimental possibilities. Interestingly, FL-H had studied composition formally, so that his one-to-one composition lessons and own autodidactic practice (as seen in the first section) were an experience that he could share with his community to the benefit of the group as a whole.

SB describes comparable social processes involved in his improvising community:

> Well, one of the things we like most is just being in a coach and watching Toy Story and talking about music all day. You know, it was great hanging out with lots of people, and you kind of go 'Yeah we should keep doing this, it's just nice'. It was inspired by the idea of having a community, a large group of musicians, especially in London. London's so big, so getting people together of like mind, where you...have to have a reason to go somewhere 'cos its gonna take you an hour at least, so I think the social, and that was certainly

one of the things that we liked the most, the actual social aspect of it.

SB emphasizes how positive social processes in the band were a significant motivating factor, providing the impetus for musicians to travel across a large city, fostering a community of like-minded people, trust and mutual understanding, and supporting musical and artistic curiosity through social interactions between the group members enacted through playing and conversation. Social activity around and through music is of course found in other genres (musicians spending time with each other after performances to unwind and assess the music they have just played), but here improvisers invest their social activity with other musicians with deeper significance in their wider musical practice than simply unwinding with a colleague. Communities of practice have thus been vital to the development of the musicians interviewed in this study, encompassing the sense of obligation to share practice and sustain one another; the importance of maintaining social as well as musical relationships; and a recognition that any and every kind of interaction in the shared experience of improvising musicians has the potential to contribute to common musical development.

<1>Improvising to learn

As improvisation continues to become further established as a legitimate field of study within academic institutions, investigating the fundamental musical and psychological processes in this unique creative activity has become an important research priority. This chapter has examined the views of eight highly experienced improvising musicians, offering insights into how these musicians learned and expanded their creative practices, and has revealed three distinct ways of learning – autodidactism, mentoring, and learning in a social context. Importantly, the interplay

between these three learning modes seems to have allowed improvisers to be creative in their learning paths as well as developing their own musical creativity. Free improvisers seem to feel empowered to use any material or methodology from their own practice, with the consequence that in the wider social context of an improvising group their own autodidactic practice informs collaborative creative processes.

As the study has shown, autodidactism is important to these musicians, for a number of possible reasons. Improvising musicians tend to come from a wide range of backgrounds including classical, popular and 'world' music, visual art, dance/performance studies and noise music, and in half of the interviews the musicians expressed a desire to move beyond the genre confines of their previous experience of learning music. As a result, improvisers are able to create their own pedagogical narrative in a world where travel and the accessibility of music and information has rapidly expanded. Having personal control over their learning processes ensured that these musicians remained engaged in musical development by being able to exercise their preferences. Söderman and Folkestad (2004) highlight the importance of informal learning environments for young musicians playing hip hop and rap music. Rehearsals and performances encountered by many if not all musicians can constitute important informal learning environments, but for the participants in our study, these informal environments provided particularly crucial situations for facilitating autodidactic learning. Artistic processes in group improvised music require creative independence at the same time as highly developed analytical skills, and the importance of autodidactism as a process that fosters skills such as independent thought and creative curiosity is evident in these improvisers' musical choices and careers. Thus, the creative processes of improvised music and the learning processes that enable and develop creativity, inform each other – a dynamic

link between informal learning environments and autodidactic processes for improvising musicians that future research should explore in more detail.

Improvising presents unique possibilities and environments for creating multiple social and musical roles. Lewis's (2008) account of AACM musicians in Chicago creating their own educational paths, seeking mentors, and finding groups with which to engage and learn, chimes with the experiences described by the musicians interviewed in our study. Although there were no formal educational options available to our participants, there was a learning model that could be adapted by each individual, with less experienced players acquiring skills through listening and negotiating with more established musicians. Thus, deliberately or not, more advanced or experienced musicians can act as mentors through the music that they play and the attitudes that they embody. MN has expressed this as acquiring "social virtuosity", a phrase that highlights the complications and nuances that are central to negotiating improvised music. While there are many examples of mentoring relationships within other forms of music, improvised music presents situations where autodidactic learning can merge or be informed by mentoring relationships, a feature demonstrated in MN's experience of playing alongside her mentor in workshops and performances.

Learning in a social context presents complex negotiations between personal and group identities; and balancing the need for musicians' creative autonomy with the artistic demands in creating a cohesive group composition is not always achieved. One way in which social virtuosity can be realized is when improvisers practise collaborative orchestration, where other musicians are recognized not only by virtue of their instruments but also through their idiosyncratic sound and techniques of sound-making. In learning to be an improviser, many aspects of musicianship can be

developed in a focused and individual manner; but other aspects – such as learning to take equal creative responsibility for the music produced – can only emerge from more complex and distributed social processes.

Musicians wanting either to enhance their general musicianship or to become improvisers have various options available to them if they wish to explore improvisation further – from Continuing Professional Development programmes within orchestras, to modules, degree courses, and summer schools at Higher Education establishments. While exploring improvisation has the potential to enhance many musicians' musical journeys and lives, it seems important to maintain the distinctive features of the interviewees' experiences. For the musicians in the study, becoming improvisers was a multifaceted and deeply engaging experience that they created for themselves within the specific context of a larger community. As demonstrated by groups such as the AACM and FIG, a strong motivation to establish alternative playing and learning structures created an environment where personal and group ethics informed artistic development and knowledge distribution. This social responsibility constitutes a crucial dimension to the creative processes of many improvisers by providing opportunities for negotiating difference through creative collaboration; and is particularly important to take into account when considering how to create a multifaceted learning environment for future musicians who wish to learn to improvise.

As observed earlier, free improvisation does not have the same type of pedagogical legacy as does classical music (Varvarigou & Green 2014; Varvarigou 2014). If this means of making music is to be nurtured and developed further, documenting and researching effective methods of pedagogical communication is of paramount importance, allowing good practice to be preserved, developing

approaches and methods, and creating a critical dialogue about how to foster creativity. The study presented in this chapter indicates a number of promising guidelines for such pedagogy. Following the ethos of art school teaching and self-directed learning, students wishing to progress as improvisers should be encouraged and supported to explore the expertise or abilities they see as most important in developing themselves as creative musicians, to set their own goals, to push themselves towards those goals, and to learn to engage in ongoing critical reflection and debate on their own practice. Teachers may play an important mentoring role with students by creating music together, or inviting them to participate as colleagues in their own practice, and offering musical suggestions and directions in the course of playing together. They might also identify mentors in local free improvising communities to whom to direct students, and engage students in debate about musical values, as well as passing on knowledge and evaluating technique. Finally, it would also be important to link students into wider networks of improvisers, or ideally to support students in forming their own communities of practice, encouraging them both to learn about existing models, and to develop their own organization strategies and principles of musical engagement.

This research is also relevant for to the study of collaboration in creative contexts. Recent contributions in the psychology of music provide empirical examples that highlight the importance of social context in studying musical development (MacDonald, Kreutz and Mitchell, 2012); and there is a growing body of literature highlighting the importance of variables such as peer groups, the family, the relationship between teacher and pupil, and between musicians themselves, upon musicians' skills, knowledge about music, and their constantly evolving musical identities (MacDonald, Hargreaves and Miell, 2002). Moreover, recent developments

have begun to interrogate the nature of creativity itself, and to question the extent to which creativity can be conceptualized as a personal characteristic, residing within an individual and manifesting itself across a range of domains (Hargreaves, Miell and MacDonald 2012; see also contributions to this volume). An alternative is to view creativity is a social construction that is distributed between individuals in collaborative contexts.

A particular view of human development through creative collaboration has been offered by those social constructionist theorists who argue that learning is fundamentally a social phenomenon, in which dialogue plays a central role. As Vygotsky (1978) proposed, "Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in co-operation with his peers." These theorists believe that the key process in collaborative learning is the creation of a joint definition of a task arising from an engagement with each other's view of the situation (MacDonald, Miell and Mitchell, 2002). The key point here is that the improvisational contexts described in this chapter provide just the type of creative contexts that these theorists view as central to learning: an improvisational workshop of the type described by MN involving group contextualized mentoring, dialogue, and autodidactic learning exemplifies exactly the 'awakening' context that Vygotsky described above. These social and psychological variables not only provide an important backdrop to what is produced when musicians improvise, but they also crucially influence and shape the nature of the interaction and the music itself (MacDonald and Wilson, 2014), and are particularly important in an open-ended task like improvisation. Improvisation provides a unique context for studying the distributed and social nature of creativity, with much to be learned about key musical and psychological processes, and as a

ubiquitous musical practice with important artistic, educational and therapeutic applications, the learning modes and their interactions explored in this chapter deserve more attention. Acknowledging the unique aspects of group musical improvisation as a social, spontaneous, creative and accessible artistic practice opens up exciting prospects for teachers, theorists and researchers.

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<1> Notes

[1] The participants were given the opportunity to remain anonymous, and one chose to do so, with the consequence that while their data informs this chapter, any identifying features have been removed.